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THE CALL

BY O. W. FIRKINS

I WAS second lieutenant of a hastily recruited Oregon company in the American Expeditionary Force, and the incident I relate occurred in the difficult and anxious weeks of the American conquest of the Argonne. The forest was intricate, the trails narrow, and the signs which the native read with ease were inscrutable to the foreigner. The men were forced to advance in small linear detachments, which were separated for hours from the main body, and the danger of any group that failed to rejoin its companions at the appointed time and place was very great. A French guide was assigned to each detachment. His place was at the head of the column, while the second lieutenant who directed the movement took his place in the rear except when actual fighting was in progress. The reason for this was simple but sufficing. Americans between battles are only human, and in the course of a trying march through hilly and woody country the temptation to leave ranks in quest of a rabbit or squirrel, of rest, or,—most of all, in quest of water,—was nearly irresistible. To see that it did not become altogether irresistible was the business of the second lieutenant in the rear of the line.

My own guide, Pierre Bonnat, was an Auvergnat, tallish for a Frenchman,—dark-haired, with a high sugar-loaf forehead, melancholy, half-retreating eyes, and a bow-shaped moustache thin enough not to screen the play of sensitive and shapely lips. He had a chipped and splintered English, which invariably proved more useful in a crisis than my own college-born and café-nourished French. Between French and English I came soon to know and love this peasant as one of the most faithful, tender, manly souls whom I had known in any country. His Catholic faith was untouched by the license of the times; he believed in ghosts as simply as his forbears, and was wont to tell a tale of the spirit of a grandsire who, when the family estate was

in danger through the disappearance of a title-deed, appeared one night to Pierre's oldest uncle, and led him up the stairway to a little loft in which the precious document had been too carefully secreted. "When need is, they come back—*si, si, M'sieu*, they come back," he would say with the meekest insistence when I allowed myself to smile faintly at these delusions. He had a low-pitched, mellow voice, and nature or practice had gifted him with a very low but remarkably penetrating call or whistle, which, heard at a distance, no stranger could have distinguished from the ordinary feral noises of the wood. The men in my detachment had been taught to recognize and obey this call.

On the night before the march, Pierre and I, sitting in my tent, traced together on an official map the route which the detachment was to take on the ensuing day. Pierre spoke of the official map with the extreme deference which masked his contempts, and put on a pleased surprise whenever any allegation of the map agreed with the facts in his memory. Our route lay to the northwest. The great landmark for the stranger was Mont St. Robert, about twelve miles east, mostly hid by the forest, but emerging into plain view wherever a westerly ravine broke the density of the woods. The Germans lay between our route and Mont St. Robert to the east and north, and their fire was expected to diminish toward the close of the day, as our route diverged more and more toward the northwest. Pierre pointed out to me a stone bridge over a stream called the Aure; our arrival at which, some time between four and six P. M., would mean the attainment of comparative safety. These few facts fixed themselves in my mind; the fullness of my trust in Pierre made me slightly inattentive to the rest.

In the morning all went well. The day was fine, the trees were a shield from the sun, and for hours I had no occasion to remind a straggler of his duty. I amused myself by watching Mont St. Robert as it showed itself from time to time through the ravines that seamed the forest. On its side was a decayed fortification of the Roman era, in which windows or rather openings of various size could be made out by the help of a field-glass. I counted twenty-three distinct apertures with various flecks or patches which might be openings or might be stains. The fire of

the enemy, though often heard, rarely grazed our column. At ten o'clock a ball nipped a soldier's knee; at half-past three a sergeant's cheek was ripped open. When Pierre and I met for a few moments, his tranquillity was reassuring.

In the later afternoon the men's spirits flagged a little; the fire, though mainly harmless, was steady as ever, and about four o'clock I was disturbed by an incident of absolutely no importance, as it seemed, except the importance which the smallest mystery possesses to men traversing an unknown and hostile country. A file like ours is a spinal column in which the vertebrae are men. That column has a spinal marrow which on occasion can quiver from end to end. About four o'clock I felt what I can only describe as a shudder run down this cord and terminate in me. The column scarcely paused; no accident was reported; my inquiries of the half-dozen men in front of me elicited nothing but confused or humorous replies. From that moment, however, I was a little anxious. I had a sense of moving east instead of west, a sense which it was hard to prove or disprove, since the path ran first east, then west, like the lacings of a shoe, and landmarks were rarely to be seen.

I began to look a little eagerly for signs of the end of the day's journey. After four o'clock we might hope to come upon the stone bridge that crossed the little river Aure. Four o'clock came, half-past, five o'clock, but no river. It was nearly six o'clock when Mont St. Robert, which had last been seen about an hour after midday, emerged into clear view through another break in the forest. It looked strangely near and clear, and the impulse to count as a sedative to the nerves made me reckon up again the visible openings on its hoary and broken front. I counted twice: the total was certain; there were twenty-nine. Only one inference was possible: we were approaching Mont St. Robert, from which we should gradually have receded, and were moving northeast toward the points where the German force was concentrated.

I was sure that Pierre had been wounded or blinded; nothing less could have beguiled his vigilance. Hastily halting the line, I made my way forward with some effort, only to find Pierre gone and an American private in the lead. To my angry question

this man replied a little shakily: "Dead, sir—didn't you know? Shell splinter—the heart. About four o'clock." Between grief, wrath, and alarm, I could hardly put the questions that hurried to my lips. Pierre had died, as the man said, about four o'clock, and the soldier nearest him had tried to send a message back to me. That message had evaporated on the way. It had passed, as it crept down the line, from certainty to probability, from probability to conjecture, from conjecture to a vague hint of unknown evil, till it reached me finally as a shapeless fear. At the point where Pierre fell, the trail was unusually distinct, and the head soldier, in the absence of orders and the vanity of leadership, had pressed on. He had failed to note the point where the trail diverged to the northwest, and we were astray without a guide near set of sun in the depths of an intricate and unknown forest raked by German fire.

The head soldier protested that he could guide us back, and after a moment's irresolution I allowed him to try. Twilight falls early and blurs the trails in a great forest. In a quarter of an hour he admitted his bewilderment. A second tried, a third, I tried myself—all to no purpose. Extrication by our own means at that hour was plainly out of the question. I ordered the men to halt and lie down at intervals of six feet. The distress of the men, though not extreme, was very evident. Brave men are not brave in all situations, even in war. They are brave in certain well-defined situations, and are likely to be overset by something, perhaps not so dangerous in itself, which lies outside their programme of contingencies. The earth and air themselves seem suddenly hostile, and the very stars, gleaming through the tree-trunks, seem to signal their whereabouts to the enemy.

We lay in this suspense for about three-quarters of an hour. We had grown used to all the sounds of the forest, even to the firing and distant shellbursts, when the attention of the troop was suddenly arrested by a new sound—a long, vaguely musical, surprisingly low, surprisingly penetrating sound. The men stirred, half sat up, awaited some signal from me, whispered inaudibly, and, remembering orders, crouched on the ground again. I spoke to the man beside me—a phlegmatic but trustworthy fellow named Jenkins—in what I meant to be a steady voice.

"Jenkins, you heard that sound?"

"Yes, sir."

"What was it?"

"I don't know, sir."

"What do you think it was?"

"Pierre's whistle, sir."

"But Pierre"—I could not end the sentence.

"I know, sir. In the heart."

"Then it's not his whistle?"

"No, sir." (Tone perfectly respectful, but quite incredulous.)

I lay down with a brusque movement intended to bring back Jenkins to his senses. In less than three minutes the sound came again—this time with something like an appeal, an urgency, in its long concluding glide. It brought half the men to a sitting posture. I was not angry with them, but I spoke angrily for all that.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing, sir." They lay down again obediently.

Something forced me to turn to Jenkins again.

"Was that Pierre's whistle, Jenkins?"

"I think so, sir."

"You think dead men whistle?"

"I don't know much about dead men, sir. But I know Pierre's whistle."

"Is he dead or alive, do you think?"

"I don't know." He stopped, then resumed respectfully:

"Does it matter, sir?"

"*Matter?*"

"I mean, I would trust Pierre, alive or dead. He would still be Pierre. I would trust him to help us."

I looked hard at the blurred human shape beside me in the shadow. "Jenkins," I said, "you're the one man of sense in this detachment. Alive or dead, we'll follow his whistle."

I drew the men around me as noiselessly as I could, and told them of my purpose. The red mounted to my cheek in the dark when I thought of re-telling the story to the club at home or reporting it to my senior officer the next day. But the ripple of smothered laughter which I had expected from Americans in-

formed of a design so puerile did not come. The men were alert, almost hopeful, as I ranged them in a somewhat shortened line and took my place at their head. Jenkins came next, and the third man was a young physician whose advice and skill had served me more than once. The whistle had stopped, and, after my preparations were made, I had a moment's fear lest the re-descending silence should prove that I had been a fool. I was almost cursing myself for succumbing to the vagaries of an untaught man like Jenkins, when from the southwest, about a hundred yards away, the sound came again, low, clear, restrained, imperative. I felt the line behind me tighten like a bowstring. "Forward," I said, and we plunged into the gloom.

The travel was very slow at first, but as our feet grew adept in the manners of the ground, we were able slowly to increase our pace. At brief intervals I ordered the men to number themselves—one, two, three, four, etc.—to make sure that no one had fallen from the ranks. After about ten minutes, the increasing firmness and flatness of the ground indicated that we had come upon a trail. We should have lost the track repeatedly, however, but for the variations in the note of the whistle, which took on a sharp, short, warning emphasis when we deviated from the path. The German fire crossed our route rather irregularly and aimlessly from time to time, and I noticed, or thought I noticed, that the voice timed itself to these explosions, bringing us to a halt by its cessation just before a tract of ground in our front was swept by hostile fire. A cheerfulness and trust, remarkable in view of the danger and difficulty that still encircled us, animated the entire column, and I felt its rebound in the rise of my own spirits. We were clearly retracing our route, and I tried to recall remembered objects, though in that darkness it was very hard to make out a correspondence between dim sights and dimmer memories.

I should have been glad to identify the spot at which the route that our companions had taken diverged to the northwest. But any such discovery was clearly not to be hoped for; a route which we had missed in daylight would not disclose itself to the most anxious scrutiny in the dark. The whistle came more and more decidedly from the south; it was guiding us back to our camp of

the previous day. One spot on that route I still hoped to ascertain, the spot where Pierre had fallen. A moment came when one of the men who had been close to Pierre when he fell pointed out a large oak under which he was nearly sure that we should find the dead body of our guide. He was wrong; there was nothing under the tree but knotted roots and trampled grass-tufts. We resumed our course; he pointed out more timidly another tree, and, on reaching the spot, we came upon a dusky, horizontal object, in which, by the glimmer of the single lantern we had dared to light, we made out successively a body, a face, the face of Pierre. He had bled freely, and the ground beside him was moist to the hand. The doctor felt his heart. "Quite dead," he said. "Has he been dead long?" I asked. "Three hours at least." It was not five minutes since we had heard the whistle, a whistle that seemed bright with the confidence of rescue.

"Go back to the file," I said. "I'll join you presently." I stooped down once more and looked into my friend's face. There was a peace on the lips that might have been taken for a smile. I am an Anglo-Saxon, with a liberal share of the self-curb-ing instincts of my race, but I think that if the whole troop had been there in full daylight I could not have withstood the impulse which made me stoop and press my lips to Pierre's. As I was about to lift my head I was seized with a still less rational impulse. *I put my ear to those lips.* In the excitement of my shaken nerves I mistook for a sound in the ear what was—what must have been—an echo in the memory. Fancy or truth, I heard these whispered words:

"When need is, they come back."

O. W. FIRKINS.